

TriCornerNews

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Taking direct quotes from the Human Rights Watch and Bring Back Our Girls, artist Angela Fremont-Appel took to acrylic paint as another medium to represent the girls who had been kidnapped in Chibok, Nigeria. *Photo by Kaitlin Lyle*

Chibok Project focuses on resilience in the face of trauma

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BY

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PINE PLAINS — When the news broke in the summer of 2014 that 276 schoolgirls had kidnapped by the Boko Haram in Chibok, Nigeria, artist Angela Fremont-Appel had been working as a NYC public school art teacher. Now almost seven years after that story took the world by storm, Fremont-Appel has drawn both from her own personal experiences and her capacity as an artist to raise awareness about violence against girls through The Chibok Project. Currently residing in the East Village in the City, Fremont-Appel said she had been teaching art for the last 20 years when she learned about kidnapping. She recalled a photograph published on the front page of The New York Times depicting the 276 girls dressed in hijabs and sitting with the book of Koran behind them. By the time the photograph reached The New York Times, the girls had been missing for almost a week.

Thinking back on her visceral reaction to the news, Fremont-Appel said, “I knew that I would make art about it because as an artist responding to my own inner feeling about it and knowing how terrible it was for these children, I had to make art that would connect in some way and show that I was somehow bearing witness to what happened.”

Turning to the ceramic studio at Hunter College in NYC where she was doing her post graduate work, Fremont-Appel created a 3-inch figure out of clay that she fired and dressed in a hijab, marking the first of many figures she’d make over the next three years.

However, even after trying different positions for her figures and different ceramic techniques, the artist said she wasn’t satisfied. Then she met fellow artist Marina Ferrara. Ferrara said the reason she believed Marina Ferrara was having such a hard time was because the artist was feeling so much sadness when she needed to find a way to make the process more joyful.

Drawing on the internet, Fremont-Appel found an image of 82 girls who had been released in exchange for five Book of Koran members, and observed that

they were photographed with their arms in the air. Considering the historical significance of women captured in art with their arms up, Fremont-Appel realized she needed to see the girls as survivors rather than as victims.

Returning to the studio, she began making figures with their arms reaching up as a testament to their heroism and their resiliency in the face of tragedy. She completed the rest of the 276 figures on March 12, the day before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic.

Through The Chibok Project, Fremont-Appel is raising funds to pay artists in Nigeria to work with the kidnapping survivors.

“We know when people make art and talk about it, something in them begins to heal,” she said, adding that donations will go toward funding artist fees and art materials.

Through ChaNorth in Pine Plains, Fremont-Appel was able to discuss her art with the public at an Open Studio event on Sunday afternoon, April 25. ChaNorth is an international artists-in-residency program that began in 2006, which annually hosts 48 writers and artists during seven four-week sessions that run from April through November. It had limited scheduling this year due to pandemic restrictions.

Displayed against the stark white studio walls, Fremont-Appel’s work was compelling, from the ceramic figurines dressed in deep-colored hijabs to the acrylic painting hanging on one wall that boldly stated direct quotes from the Human Rights Watch and Bring Back Our Girls.

On another wall, a series of 12 watercolor paintings was hung, depicting the girls with their arms in the air along with snippets taken from their experience. The longer one became absorbed in Fremont-Appel’s work, the more the magnitude of the girls’ trauma seemed to resonate. Yet upon closer inspection, the viewer might have noticed how Fremont-Appel magically managed to capture a look of serenity on the faces of her figurines, perhaps as a reminder of the girls’ innocence in the midst of the unspeakable horrors they suffered.

For more information on ChaNorth, call 845-750-2629 or go to www.chanorth.com.

Section:

PINE PLAINS